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ABSTRACT

Systematic efforts at the Arizona State Child Study Laboratory were successful in replacing children's undesirable superhero play with other types of sociodramatic play. Teachers found superhero play undesirable because it was aggressive and noisy and was accompanied by an increase in random activity. Observations indicated that superhero play had all six elements of sociodramatic play discussed by Smilansky but did not fully develop them. Specifically, such play was limited in the roles adopted by children, did not build on past experience or encourage sharing ideas through language, and emphasized conflicts that were resolved by physical aggression or "flying away." However, the popularity of superhero play showed that it met real needs for active play and for expressing angry and aggressive feelings. Other sociodramatic play was encouraged by gradually introducing costumes, props, and materials around a theme such as transportation or a grocery store, and by preparing the children through field trips, discussion, and stories. The teacher's general role was to deliberately enrich and change the environment and to suggest techniques for getting along with others if conflicts arose. However, the teacher had to supplement her role with children who depended on a superhero identity to compensate for their lack of self-esteem and social skills by directing them into new activities.(CB)

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SUPERMAN COMES TO PRESCHOOL:

SUPERHERO TV PLAY

Those of us who work with children recognize the vital importance of play. While playing, the child is learning about himself and the world around him and most particularly the people in that world. A child begins to understand that others may be happy or sad, frustrated or afraid, and that they may want to possess or to be first. Of equal importance, he also learns that he can stand up for himself and find ways to influence others. Children develop remarkable social skills as they play together. Indeed, play is often spoken of as the child's work.

The need to play with others is central to the program of the Child Study Laboratory at Arizona State University. There, facilities for social play such as the house corner and dress-ups are regarded as key learning materials, equal in importance to those provided for the development of fine motor skills and cognitive growth. The teachers watch this social play carefully and help individual children as they move into and out of it.

The laboratory serves both as a research facility for the university's psychology department and as a high quality preschool for the community at large. In this setting, the role of the teachers is a demanding one. It is their task to create a healthy climate for learning and to respond positively to the needs of the children. They prepare the environment with care being given to the developmental needs of the individual children. They then serve as facilitators as the children use the materials and interact with the other children and adults in the environment.

The open periods are key learning times for the staff as well as for the children. We are continually evaluating and assessing the play that is observed, asking such questions as, "Is the play meeting our goals for the children? Is the play constructive?" This emphasis on evaluation led us, in the last two years, to recognize a gradual but significant change in the nature of the children's play. More and more, as time went by, much of their play was patterned after television shows and movies and particularly after "superhero" shows.

This play was so attractive to the children that on some days the open period was almost totally dominated by Superman, the Incredible Hulk, Scooby-Doo and the Duke boys. The play spread from the inside to the outside and back again. It seemed more aggressive than other play and was accompanied by a high noise-level and an increase in random activity. We intervened with positive redirection but any drop in the frequency of the play was short-lived. When the teachers began discussing the problem with each other, it was evident that superhero play was occurring to some degree in all of the groups.

Because of our concern, we attended a workshop on superhero play at the NAEYC Conference in Detroit. The workshop was full to overflowing making it clear that this was a concern not only to us but to teachers everywhere. We carried some thought provoking ideas

from this workshop back to Arizona and in our discussions began exploring the issue in earnest.

We began by considering sociodramatic play. Sara Smilansky's writings give six essential elements of sociodramatic play. They include:

1. Imitative role play in which the child expresses a make-believe role in imitative acts and/or words.

2. Make-believe with objects.

3. Make-believe in substituting words for acts and situations.

4. Persistence in the episode for at least ten minutes.

5. Interaction of at least two participants.

6. Verbal communication about the play.

The first four elements occur in dramatic play. The last two are essential for sociodramatic play.

Smilansky's observations show that until about three years of age, a child imitates small pieces of his peers' (and significant adults') behavior, expressing his identification with them through dramatic play. He irons as Mommy does or goes to work like Daddy, or cooks like Daddy and goes to work like Mommy. After three, he begins to see that the thoughts, feelings and actions he has been imitating are not merely single episodes but that they are also reactions to other people. Sociodramatic play is born of the understanding that people react to each other and interact with each other. The child now wants and needs other children for he wants to imitate both actions and reactions. He wants to reproduce the world as he understands it.

The superhero play we observed did indeed have all six of these elements. However, as we looked further at the role of sociodramatic play in the child's development as described by Smilansky, we found that there are three main areas which are developed in a child by true sociodramatic play. The first of these is creativity based on the utilization of past experience. Smilansky states, "The imaginative 'let's pretend', which is based on understanding and modified by the necessity of adjusting to the ideas of others, is an important part of living itself. This imaginative element in spontaneous play is part of the creative approach to experience so valuable in the scientist and artist." The superhero play we were seeing was indeed imaginative in the 'let's pretend' sense, but it did not seem to lend itself to adjusting to the ideas of others nor did it involve the child's real world.

The second area Smilansky refers to is intellectual growth. This includes the power of abstraction, widening of concepts and acquisition of new knowledge. She writes, "In playing together, children share their ideas and concepts about the world around them. Language is important here and children use language more

freely in sociodramatic play than at most other times." We felt the superhero play fell short in this respect. It lacked a real sharing of ideas and concepts and was limited in language, with physical feats (actual or imaginary) taking precedence.

The third area Smilansky discusses is that of social skills. She includes positive give and take, tolerance and consideration. These social skills develop in carrying on episodes of family or community life when children must use techniques for getting along with others for achieving purposes or constructing settings. Here too, the superhero play we were seeing was not accomplishing what was needed.

We now analyzed superhero play with respect to Smilansky's comments. The first thing we realized was it always had a conflict at the center of it. The nature of this conflict was big over little and strong over weak. The playing out of these conflicts then by necessity included aggression - physical aggression with or without actual contact or verbal aggression. Conflicts were resolved by physical strength or magical powers. This was of particular concern to us since an important goal in our program is to facilitate the development of the children's impulse control. The progressive sequence moves from passivity to physical aggression to verbal aggression to verbal reasoning. In superhero play, there was no real opportunity for verbal reasoning, for problem solving, for finding out that it was okay to talk things out and for compromising. There was no opportunity to develop a real give and take or an exchange of ideas. There was only conflict -- "Pow-Pow" and Superman flies away.

This superhero play emphasized physical and verbal aggression and provided little opportunity to move beyond that to verbal reasoning. The superhero play also had an overpowering, all consuming nature. It invaded all areas. Play-dough tools became weapons, Batman and Robin flew into the grocery store and through the block areas. The Duke boys roared through the room, outside around the garden, up into the treehouse, and down the slide. In attempting to illustrate some of our considerations, we took some video tape in one of our four year old classes, asking the teacher not to intervene in the play. It was a group of normal healthy four year olds with varying levels of social skills. We got exactly and immediately what we were expecting. The children began at the play-dough table by putting play-dough tools in their belt as superhero weapons and began wandering throughout the rooms looking for action. In the ten minute segment, we saw all of the elements of superhero play we were concerned about:

- -Interruptive play
- -Physical aggression with and without contact
- -Conflicts resolved by physical strength
- -Avoidance/fly away play which spills to outside

Another of our concerns was that the superhero play had a limited number of roles. There was one Superman, one Lois Lane, one Hulk. Other than the hero him/herself (usually with one trusted companion), all other roles were victims or bad guys. This was in contrast to true sociodramatic play where there could be several doctors, numerous mailpersons or storekeepers and many companions

or helpers.

One of our greatest concerns - the crux of the problem it seemed to us - was that the superhero play allowed the child to avoid real growth. When things got tough, he or she could fly away, avoiding any real settling of the issue.

Finally, and sadly, there was that one child who always wore his special superhero shirt, or socks, or belt. The only times he appeared to feel he had any real power was when he was in character. It seemed the child most immersed in superhero play often seemed to have the lowest self esteem and to be in need of the most help in experiencing himself as competent in the real world.

Our evaluation of superhero play reinforced our original feeling that we wanted to limit such play. How we would do that became our next challenge. Our earlier attempts to use positive redirection had been only temporarily effective and we felt that we were simply treating symptoms rather than getting at the core of the problem.

By their persistence in superhero play, the children were telling us that it had benefits for them. It enabled them to express and deal with angry and aggressive feelings and it lent itself to their need for active, physical play. We wanted to be sure that our solution provided for these genuine and legitimate needs. Also, we wanted our solution to be consistent with our positive environment. We did not want to say, "Superhero play is not allowed" or "Superhero play is allowed only for the last fifteen minutes of the morning." We felt such artifical rules would reduce social play. We wanted a solution that came from the children's point of view, which would keep social play at a high level and, at the same time, encourage creativity, intellectual growth, language development and social skills.

We decided that the most logical way to proceed was to develop appropriate and exciting kinds of play in the room and in the play yard. We felt that, as this would increase, the social skills of all the children, even those who had been so dependent on superhero play would grow and develop. We felt that sociodramatic play in itself was vital and we wanted to do nothing that would reduce the amount of such play. Rather, we wanted to concentrate on building social play that was so attractive and met the children's needs so well, that it would reduce the amount of superhero play.

We reminded ourselves that we wanted to develop play that:

-allowed for many roles rather than just a few
-allowed for an absence of or choice about conflict rather than built-in conflict
-provided opportunities for verbal problem solving and compromise rather than solutions by physical force or magic
-provided for inclusion of many materials
-allowed for dealing directly and in a real way with difficult situations rather than avoiding them

Encouraging, building and facilitating such social play in the classroom was not easy. We found it best to take the lead

from the children, so we attempted to build sociodramatic play in our classrooms that was related to real-life experiences. We see the inside and the outside environments of equal importance, so our curriculum ideas were designed to flow back and forth using both. We found that when exciting things were going on inside they were carried over to the outside by the children and provided stimulation for incorporating the play yard into the play. In contrast, if the inside area provided only manipulatives, then the outside area would be used for just running around.

We spent a good amount of time preparing both the children and the environment for play that was centered in particular curriculum areas often using field trips. This proved to be very effective in developing a series of activities centered around the curriculum area of transportation. These activities continued for a period of several weeks and included a walking trip (during which we observed everything from roller skates to electric carts to motorcycles), a tram ride on our campus, a car trip to ride the steam engine train at a local park, a city bus ride to another park and back and a visit to our classroom by a pilot with all of his gear. This is a long list and it is of more than passing interest that, other than the trip to the train, none of these activities required drivers, parent participation or money, since there is no charge for children on the bus in our community. Each of these experiences was preceded by related stories and discussions and was followed by conversations and a class-dictated experience story.

This intense preparation generated a long and sustained period of related play. We provided suitable costume material (hats and shirts) after the trips. The children lined up chairs in the room for trains and/or buses and we made available plenty of paper and markers, cash registers and toy money for tickets. This was one of the activities in which the play flowed from the inside to the outside and back into the inside, with the children using the large, hollow blocks and trikes outside after they bought their tickets inside. The children made space helmets from ice cream containers and rockets from paper towel rolls and incorporated the climbers and treehouse in the yard as their space ships. A box from a furniture store, large enough to hold several chairs and several children, was introduced into the room. It immediately became a train - the children decorated it with markers and used paper to cut out lights and whistles which were pasted onto it. The next week, the box became a bus. The children then spent another day painting every inch of its surface after which it was put into the yard. It lasted another week in the yard and was used with the hollow blocks outside as a boat and a plane.

We watched carefully all that happened during this series of transportation activities and concluded that we had been successful! We had the children dealing with their conflicts verbally; many children were alternating in real-life roles; many materials beyond just costumes were being used; there was a flow of creative verbal ideas. As we had expected, the children became so involved in this play that there was virtually no superhero play.

We found that other and less complex ideas for which field trips were optional, could produce the same high level of play.

One such idea was grocery store play. The children were prepared with stories, pictures and discussions before any props were put out. At the Child Study Laboratory, we have developed a "store-front" that, when set up in front of shelves, provides a background for a grocery store (it also works wonderfully well as a library, a post office, or a doctor's office). The store front along with a supply of empty food containers and grocery bags; purses and grocery carts; cash registers and play money will generate many days of play which incorporate the housekeeping area, the cut and paste table for making signs and price tags as well as the outside for trips home with the groceries.

We found that the technique of gradually introducing props and materials when beginning an exciting and new area of sociodramatic play was most effective. For the first couple of days, the children are not ready to use a large number of different, new props constructively. As the play goes along, the gradual addition of new accessories enriches it and also sustains interest.

We have found also that simply adding a new prop to an already established area sparks new interest. In our house corner for example, the addition of a suitcase brought in children who had not been there for weeks and engaged them and others in new and creative play. In the house corner in particular, we try to make sure there are things available which are attractive to the boys. We have acquired a number of mail carrier shirts complete with the official insignia. We also have a couple of pairs of leather boots which are especially appealing to the boys. At times we have been able to buy in quantity at clearance sales --- it was fascinating to see what happened when we put out six cowboy hats instead of one or two. To summarize, ideas did not have to involve elaborate props or field trips, but they did have to involve very deliberate change and enrichment of the environment.

The goal in sociodramatic play is child-to-child interaction but the importance of the teacher in helping the children grow into this must not be underestimated. The teacher can enrich the play by supplying the needed accessories and by suggesting techniques for getting along with others when these seem to be lacking. Thoughtful observation before stepping in to supply such materials or to make such suggestions, however, is as important as the materials or suggestions introduced. Effective play does need adult facilitation. It also needs teacher involvement which goes far beyond merely supervising and keeping everyone safe. Bulletin boards, lesson plans and schedules are important, as are reading the stories and arranging the field trips. These, however, are the easy parts of the program. The real work begins when the children start to play and the real key to success is the thoughtful, intimate involvement of the teacher.

And now, a final consideration. After we've done all of these positive, enriching and exciting things to stimulate true sociodramatic play, what do we do for the child who is so dependent on the superhero identity that he or she carries it right into the library play or doctor play with a shirt buttoned around the neck as a cape? What is the dynamic and what are the needs of this child who is unable to leave Superman behind and move on as himself or herself? We have found that this is a child who generally feels

powerless and without impact on the environment. Also this is usually a child with very low social skills. He is not able to interplay with other children for any length of time.

We also found that these children are often skilled at avoidance techniques. They turn their heads when you attempt to talk to them making almost no eye contact. They may have high verbal skills which enable them to change the subject and distract adults from the issue at hand. These verbal skills are often deceptive because a child with them can present himself as quite advanced and his play may also appear to be advanced because of the high level of fantasy. With a closer look however, it becomes apparent that they are unable to move from dramatic play to sociodramatic play. There is a great deal of denial of feelings with these children. They are unable to acknowledge the existence of their feelings even in a situation where anger would be justified - such as having a toe stepped on or a toy grabbed away. These children will just "fly away" rather than talk about those feelings that are uncomfortable.

Superhero play is very attractive to these children. They can feel powerful, in fact this may be the only time they feel powerful. As superheros, they can be in control (Superman always is in control); feelings don't matter because they can be magic-ed away. If things get tough or difficult, superheros simply fly away and avoid them. Consequently, doctor play or post office play does not seem nearly so attractive, no matter how neat the props. These children can't switch to such play by themselves as their need to keep the superhero is too great.

The dynamics of these children puts a different perspective on the role of the teacher. The teacher does intervene with these children, not with a rule, but with positive redirection and a reflecting of feelings that says, "It's really hard for you to stop playing Superman. I know you would like to play Superman all the time, but now I would like you to stop for a while and I will help you find a different way to play in our post office. Here is a mail bag and some envelopes and money. Would you like to buy some stamps from John? He has them over there." Although the teacher is sympathetic to the difficulty and sadness of leaving Superman behind, he or she does help the child move on.

It should be mentioned here that such intervention takes up only a small portion of each day. It is best not to require a "cold-turkey" giving up of superhero play. The intervention is coupled with providing successful experiences in other areas - exploring gross motor activities for instance. Superman is a way to feel competent - another way to feel competent is to climb a tree. Teachers work to build skills in all areas which in turn lead to a higher level of self esteem. It is important however, to remember that self esteem comes from "experiencing" oneself as competent rather than from being told one is competent. This is a long process and it won't be accomplished in a week or a month. As the play around these children changes and becomes more elaborate, they will grow and gradually become ready and able to move into the whole world.

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